MEMORY AND THE PEACE OF GOD

MAY 21, 2002

FESTIVAL OF HOMILETICS

JOHN M. BUCHANAN

First, I want to welcome you on behalf of the congregation, Session and Staff of Fourth Presbyterian Church, and particularly on behalf of my colleagues and partner Joanna Adams and the other clergy who are in ministry together. This is an exciting time in the life of Fourth Presbyterian Church and we are thrilled to have you with us for a few days and for this important event.

The high pulpit on this sanctuary has stood at the heart of this churches life and ministry since 1914 (Bob – dedication date? – sent e-mail). It has been filled by strong and faithful preachers, each of whom proclaimed the good news of the Gospel in a uniquely relevant way.

John Timothy Stone (date)

Moderator of the General Assembly

_____

Harrison Ray Anderson

Moderator of the General Assembly_____

Elam Davies, _____, whose brilliant and eloquent preaching literally held this

church together and kept it strong during the turbulent 60’s and 70’s.

It has been my great privilege to join that line of preachers and now, to welcome another preacher, uniquely gifted and called to launch this congregation into a new century with a renewed commitment to its mission and its sense of itself as a “Light in the City” – one who has preached at this conference before, Joanna Adams.

So welcome. Call on us if we can do anything to make your stay more pleasant, other than asking us to get your ticket to Wrigley Field.

I pray God will bless all of us as we learn together – more about this amazing vocation of ours.

Let us pray….

Memory and Peace of God

Among the most precious words I know are:

> The wolf shall live with the lamb,
> the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
> the calf and the lion and the fatling
> together

But I confess that every time I hear them I remember something Woody Allen once said, namely: “On the day the lion and the calf and the fatling lie down together, smart money will be on the lion getting back up.”

There is something dreadfully accurate about that, isn’t there.

I am an inveterate, almost addictive newspaper reader. I’m not unique, I know. Many of us begin the day with the morning paper, or two, if you are particularly blessed. What I read first, I confess, depends on how the local sports franchises are doing. It is a particularly grim time around here just now — so I’m back to the first page — but recently a new dynamic has come into play. I find myself dreading what I will find there.

There it was again yesterday. After a blessed period of calm – as:

> *Bomber Disguised As Israeli Soldier Kills 2 in Market*
>
> *Palestinian Leadership Condemns the Attack*
>
> *Israeli Tanks Return to Ramallah*

I could hardly bear to read:

> “The bombing, which spattered an aisle of cucumbers, cauliflower and green

> peppers with blood as the open air market resounded with screams.
>
> As her six year old daughter, lay in a hospital bed beneath a Sesame Street mobile, her face and body lacerated by shrapnel, Simi Buskila said the military operation has not made her safe.”

I find myself thinking a lot these days about an alternate vision — a precious vision 2,500 years old — from the prophet

I am about to create new heavens and a new earth. . . .
For I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy. . . .
No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it. . . .
No more . . . an infant that lives but a few days
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime. . . .

They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and
eat their fruit. . . .

> They shall not hurt or destroy. . . .
>
> (Isaiah 65:17-21, 25)

Those words have touched, in every age, the deepest human yearnings—for safety, security, home, and peace. They are striking words, because the story of human history is mostly the story of the absence of peace—the story of war, actually. War after war after war, preparation for war, battles fought and won, casualties of war, the aftermath of war, in every single age of human history, leading inexorably to the next war.

New York Times writer Douglas Martin wrote an editorial on the deteriorating monuments and fading national memory of the First World War, the Great War. Martin wrote:

> World War I was so vile that nobody ever expected to see anything like it ever again. The lads who marched into fire bombs, mud, and poisonous gas, would never be forgotten.
>
> Or would they? In tens of thousands of parks, traffic triangles, and cemeteries in every corner of America, World War I memorials are crumbling faster than

> they can be shored up by people who consider them sacred, even as the events they mourn, praise, and implicitly question fade deeper into the mist.

And then, Mr. Martin editorialized:

> The Great War solved nothing, proving only that human beings, acting in organized fashion, could kill one another, more efficiently than ever dreamed.

> Most of the American dead were buried near the fields of battle. So their friends and families built shrines near the fields where they hit baseballs and held the hands of pretty girls. These tributes . . . were meant to be eternal.

How well I can remember them. I remember the neat stone pyramid several blocks from my house, in the middle of a small, grassy plot, with a few red geraniums planted by the local VFW auxiliary, and the bronze plaque with names of young men killed in 1917 and 1918, and a newer plaque on the back side with names of families I actually knew, young

men just 10 or 15 years older than I was, killed in France, Germany, Italy, North Africa, Okinawa, Iwo Jima, Saipan, at sea, 1941-45. On Memorial Day, a blessed day off from school at the end of May, the swimming pools opened, there was a parade in the morning, and afterward a little ceremony at the neighborhood War Memorial; a politician made a speech about sacrifice and heroism, the VFW commander placed a wreath, and then the exciting part and the real reason a young boy was there: an honor guard, a detachment of army reservists with real rifles, on command firing several rounds of blanks, of course, a salute to the dead, and

then a scramble to retrieve the spent shell casings still hot, treasures to put in a pocket and take home. A minister prayed, taps were played by a local high school trumpeter, women dabbed their eyes with Kleenex, men shook hands, and we headed for the swimming pool.

The monuments are deteriorating, the *New York Times* reported. 116,500 Americans died in the First World War. There were 4.3 million in uniform, only about 2,000 remain.

“How do you see what is no longer visible?” Mr. Martin asked, and pointedly observed

that “the biggest shadow memorial may be in Chicago . . . Soldier Field, dedicated to the World War I dead on Armistice Day, 1925. The City Council voted 35-3 in April to let the Chicago Bears change the name of a remodeled stadium to whatever the highest bidder wants” a decision that has been reversed and Soldier Field it will be.

If peace is important—if peace is the highest priority on God’s agenda, and there is no way to argue that it isn’t—then memory of war, the waste, the suffering, the millions and millions of combatants and innocent civilians who have died, the unleashing of the very

worst of our humanity— pogroms, massacres, holocaust—is part of it. But so is the heroism, the self-sacrifice, the nobility, the laying down of one’s life, the highest and best of our humanity.

The work of peace is hard work, relentless, tedious, frustrating work. And the reason is that when one has been hurt, invaded, violated personally or as a nation, violent response is always easier, always more immediately satisfying.

Our immediate response to what happened to us on September 11 was to strike back,

immediately and forcefully. I wanted someone to pay for what happened to us. When a suicide bomber takes the lives of innocent Israeli citizens, Israeli tanks attack Palestinian police stations, government offices and a lot of people get killed: people targeted by the military and a lot of other people who happen to be in the way. The dynamic is deadly. And the only thing it truly accomplishes is the deepening of despair, the escalating of anger and the creating of more violence, more terror. Even half-hearted admonition of our President and Secretary of State to change directions, to stop the

relentless rhythm of violence and violent response was ignored.

It is time now to stop, for God's sake. That is not to say that suicide bombing is tolerable. It is not. It is not to say that the people of Israel do not deserve to live in security and safety. It is not. It is to say — out of our faith tradition, the accumulated wisdom of 2,500 years that the current policy of immediate and strong retaliation is not working and it is making matters infinitely worse.

Catholic Scholar Gerald Sloyan said "The topic if peace brings out the banal in the

preacher …. After all, what can you say about peace except that it is a good idea?”

What you can and what we must say is that, in all its simplicity is that God does not intend this, that God’s dream for creation is one of peace and harmony. What we can and must say is that God’s peace leans on justice and that our Lord Jesus lived it and died for it and rose again to show us its promise,. What we can and must say is that peace making is the hardest work in the world: that it requires more patience, more determination, more courage and more faith than anything else:

faith that must stand in the face of the most dreadful violence.

A generation after Jesus, one of his followers wrote words that sound familiar, reminiscent of the prophet Isaiah:

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

The writer of these words was, himself, the victim of war, an exile, a prisoner in a hopeless situation.

He was a Jewish Christian by the name of John, living a generation after Jesus. He may have known Jesus. He is the author of the last book in the Bible, the Book of Revelation.

His world had collapsed. The capital of his nation, Jerusalem, was gone, flattened, burned, utterly destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans, who had finally tired of the protests and political demonstrations and revolts and riots among their Jewish subjects.

So the legions gathered and invaded and chased up and down the countryside

troublemakers, revolutionaries, and everyone who was out of line, killing every last one in the process, cornering a group of refugee Jews in the fortress at Masada, a dramatic high mountain plateau where several hundred people lived under siege for several years and finally committed suicide rather than surrender. And Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the home of every Jewish heart, the capital, the city of David’s throne and Solomon’s temple, the symbol of God’s love and presence and providence—Jerusalem and its temple were leveled, its citizens either executed or driven into exile. It was Rome’s version of the final solution. The Christian

community, too, insofar as it was identified with Judaism, was violently persecuted, its leaders either executed, imprisoned, or exiled. And so it was that an old man by the name of John found himself far from home, a prisoner on the small island of Patmos near Greece. When you visit Patmos, you can see a monastery on the spot John was thought to have been imprisoned and the cave where he was chained to the wall, with the shackles still there. And across the dark, low cave on the other side, a small opening through which the prisoner could breathe fresh air and see a slice of brilliant blue sky(Mediterrean – Agean) and sea.

John’s world had collapsed. His religion, the faith of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and David, was being systematically stamped out by the most powerful, violent political entity the world had ever known. His new faith in Jesus, the Jewish carpenter, rabbi, crucified by Rome, was also now being systemically persecuted. Christians were arrested, executed, or imprisoned as traitors to the Roman state. They were weak, powerless, without resources or friends or much hope.

Old John wanted to write a letter of encouragement to his friends under persecution. He looked out that tiny opening in his prison cell, saw the sky, the sea, and wrote striking words that somehow were smuggled out of his prison and given to the world:

> I saw a new heaven and new earth.

And he reached back centuries into the history of his people, all the way back to the prophet Isaiah, who had described Jerusalem —a joy and a delight. Now John, in his

hopeless situation, has a vision—“a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven.”

And then he wrote powerful words that people who themselves were or are up against hopeless odds would turn to gratefully: prisoner of war, political exile, terminally ill person, son-daughter-husband-wife-partner-friend keeping watch as a dear one declines and dies, you and I as we ponder the great imponderable of our own aging and mortality:

> See—the home of God is among mortals.

> He will dwell with them . . . and God
> himself will be with them;
> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
> Death will be no more;
> mourning and crying and pain will be no
> more,
> for the first things have passed away.

We read those words at memorial services, at the very moment when thoughtful and sensitive people find themselves, ourselves, experiencing the pain of grief and separation and ending, find themselves wondering about the purpose of it all, wondering about the human prospect.

John dared to see a vision of what God has in mind for the creation. That vision transcends the immediacy of the present, transcended his own dreadful situation. That bold vision is of a new heaven and new earth—a new Jerusalem—the promise of a new political order where there will be no more weeping: no more injustice, no more oppression, no more cruelty and persecution, no more racism, no more homophobia, no more unkindness and meanness, no more war, no more death. God will tenderly wipe the very tears from the eyes of the precious suffering, whomever they are.

The delusion of a frail, dying, old man? No, we believe that it is truth: precious truth, powerful truth. Those who die do not die in vain. The millions who have died in war, the countless millions who die, do not die into nothingness.

How can he say this? How can we believe this?

“Because the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them—they will be his peoples.”

How can he say this? How can we believe this?

Because we dare to believe that in Jesus Christ God has come to dwell among us and in him all the promises of the past and all the hopes for the future have come to pass.

Isaiah knew it 500 years earlier.

Old John knew it, and you and I can hold onto it and live in it.

He, Jesus Christ, is our savior and Lord. He is our friend who dwells among us. He will wipe

away every tear. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more. He is our hope. He is the peace of God.

All praise to him.

Amen